

Skokie Public Library's Book Discussion Guide

The Life Before Us by Romain Gary

- Momo asks Monsieur Hamil the question “can somebody live without love?” Why is it important for Momo to find the answer?
- How does Momo change in the course of the novel?
- What do you think Momo means when he describes Madame Rosa as a “woman without a heart.” “The people on our street said she was a woman without a heart and it’s true she had no one to look after her.” (p.10)
- Momo decides to give away his poodle, Super, so that Super could have a better life. Do you think Momo’s action is convincing considering his age?
- Why was Madame Rosa scared to death when she found out that Momo had sold his dog and thrown the money away? She takes him to Dr. Katz because she thinks he is deranged (p.15). Madame Rosa comments to Dr. Katz that “He sells what he loves best in all the world and throws five hundred francs down the sewer. Even in Auschwitz nobody did that.”
- What did you think about Momo’s use of language: artistic rather than autistic, etc.? Does he misuse words the way a young boy might do? Did you like the first person narrative?
- Why do you think Madame Rosa makes such an impression on Momo when she tells him “You don't need reasons to be afraid.” (p.38) When Momo see the cops he says “I was scared for good reason but it was good to be afraid and know why because usually I’m scared silly for no reason at all, it comes as natural as breathing.” (p.69)
- What do some of the other characters have to fear? (Monsieur Hamil, Madame Lola, the black pimp)
- How important is the need for pretending for Momo and Madame Rosa? What are some of the devices they use? Think of Arthur the umbrella, lioness dream, clowns, makeup, cellar, movies, the policeman Momo meets. (p.105)
- What is the significance of Momo’s lioness dream and why do you think Madame Rosa reacts to it the way she does? (p.41) “She woke up screaming because what was a dream to me was a nightmare to her.” and she “always said that nightmares are what dreams turn into with age.” (p.41) Why does she take him to Dr. Katz because of his dream? (p.48) Dr. Katz says Momo is sensitive while Madame Rosa fears he is mad.
- Why do you think Gary includes the quotation at the beginning of the novel: “They said: ‘Thou hast gone mad and for the sake of Him whom thou lovest.’ I said : It is only for the mad that life has savor.” Dr. Katz tells Momo that he's very intelligent and sensitive but also says “don't be alarmed. That doesn't mean you won't be normal.”
- Momo says that only “real bastards are normal.” (p.159) Does love bring madness? What is the significance of the title?
- How would you explain Momo’s view of life and happiness? (p.34) “People seem to care more about life than anything else, which is funny when you think of all the wonderful things there are in the world.” “Happiness is famous for the misery of going without it.” (p.57) He seems to equate happiness with drug addiction. You can only find happiness through artificial means. “But happiness doesn't mean much to me, I still think life is better.” (p.57) Do you think Momo will ever find happiness?



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- How would you describe the relationship between the characters? (Monsieur Hamil—carpet salesman and Momo’s good friend, Monsieur Waloumba, Monsieur N’Da Amedee, Madame Lola, who Momo thinks of as “straight out of a dream.”)
- Do you think there is an enemy or adversary in this novel? If so, who or what is it? All the characters seem to get along and there is no violence except the death of Monsieur N’Da Amedee. (p.26,29) France seems to be the only adversary or enemy—Madame Rosa tries to evade the public welfare system with false papers for the children, tries to avoid being put in the hospital to die a slow death. France is worse than nature “because its against the law to put old people out of their misery when Nature is choking them by degrees” (p.103) Nazi Germany is another enemy.
- How do Momo and Monsieur Hamil view time? When Momo stays with Hamil he says “I stayed with him quite a while, letting the time pass, the kind of time that passes slowly and isn’t French.” Monsieur Hamil likens time to the desert with its camels and “isn’t in any hurry because its carrying eternity on its back.” (p.103) Momo says “Time is just a thief.” (p.103)
- Why was Momo so fascinated with the movie dubbing machine where Nadine worked? (p.73) “It was Madame Nadine who showed me how to make the world go backwards. I really go for that.” (p.182) Why do you think Momo was so fascinated with the idea of reversing time? At the very end of the book he says: “it was Madame Nadine who showed me how to make the world go backwards. I really go for that and I sure wish it would.” (p.182)
- Why does Madame Rosa play a trick on Monsieur Kadir Yousef, Momo’s alleged father, presenting Moise to him as his Arab son? (p.128) Does she want to punish him for killing his wife, for neglecting his son?
- Do you think Kadir’s story about being committed was convincing?
- Why did Momo remain silent throughout his father's visit? How does he feel about his father at the end?
- How would you describe Nadine and Dr. Ramon as characters? How does Momo feel about them? When he first follows Nadine home he sees her two blond kids. In his opinion “they hadn’t been used much, they were as good as new. We just had nothing in common.”
- How does Momo feel about his name? (p.148) Why doesn’t he like being called Mohammed? (p.148) In book entitled *Romain Gary* by Ralph Schoolcraft the writer notes that “The novel hinges on the haphazard coexistence of Jewish and Muslim cultures, rendered all the more operative by the fact that the protagonist’s name, Momo, is the diminutive of both Mohammed and Moses...”
- In a critical article it is stated that “His (Gary’s) special importance in Holocaust literature is that he demonstrated decades before Robert Benigni’s movie, *Life is Beautiful*, that wit and humor taken to the extreme are the best defense against extreme horror.” Do you agree? What are some of the humorous aspects of this novel?
- What are some of the social issues in the novel? Treatment of old people (p.115), euthanasia, public welfare, drugs, prostitution, class differences, ethnic identity, rumors involving stereotypes and racism. (p.15, p.29, p.84)
- Comment on the nature of the family and love in the story. According to Madame Rosa what makes a family? (There are no “fathers” in this novel.)